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Cleaning up after coal

It's time to finish the job on abandoned mines before more tragedy strikes

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By Gale Norton

WASHINGTON -- Three recent accidents at abandoned coal mine sites in Pennsylvania -- two involving fatalities -- were unwelcome reminders that we have to start moving faster on cleaning up abandoned coal mine hazards.

On May 16, a group of teenage boys were swimming in an abandoned surface mining pit in Locust Summit, Northumberland County. The boys then decided to climb one of the paths toward the top of a 100-foot-high embankment. Near the top of the path, one of the boys, a 14-year-old, lost his footing and fell down the embankment into the water-filled pit. He died of a broken neck sustained during the fall.

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On the night of April 24, a man fell 100 feet into a sloped mine entry that leads into abandoned underground mine workings in Northumberland County near Shamokin. Rescuers pulled the man to safety and, miraculously, he was not injured.

But just two days later, another victim was not so lucky. Very early on the morning of April 26, a man and woman drove into a water-filled, abandoned surface mining pit in Luzerne County. Only the woman, who was driving, managed to escape. The man who drowned was just 30 years old. He was a local volunteer firefighter. This same pit was the site of a similar accident on New Year's weekend in 1998 that took the lives of five people.

Whenever I visit similar sites in any state, I shudder to see how many dangerous abandoned coal mining sites are near where people live, work and recreate. And as the tragic events this spring remind us, they are not just eyesores. They are death traps.

For the past quarter century, the federal government, state governments, communities and watershed groups have been working to clean up the remnants of coal mining that took place before the reforms in the Surface Mining Act were passed by Congress in 1977.

We've already done extraordinary work. But even after more than 25 years of national effort, we still have almost \$3 billion worth of high-priority hazards to health and safety waiting to be cleaned up in this country.

Even worse, last year the Office of Surface Mining estimated that nationwide more than 3.5 million Americans are living less than a mile from dangerous abandoned coal mines.

The truth is -- even with all we have accomplished -- we are not yet doing our best to remove the cause of needless injuries and loss of life. That's what President Bush wants to change.

In just a few short months, our authority to collect Abandoned Mine Land fees will expire. That makes this year a perfect time to evaluate what we've done and reform the system so we can get this job done sooner.

Today only 52 percent of the funds the Department of the Interior disburses under the Abandoned Mine Land program actually go to high-priority mine reclamations.

Because of the promises made more than 25 years ago when Congress enacted the Surface Mining Act, today we are not able to put our money where it is needed most. Unless this system is changed, it will take an average of 60 more years to finish this job -- in some states, it could take another century.

The president has a proposal to protect the health and safety of Americans living in the coalfields by getting these dangerous sites repaired sooner. The president's plan will start putting the money where it is needed most. It will let us finish the job in about 25 years instead of 60.

The president's legislation will finish the job we've started and finish it sooner. We will change the current statutory allocation of fee collections and start putting our money where the problem is. This will make it possible for us to finish the job decades sooner. And because we'll be putting our money where the problem is, we'll even save \$3.2 billion.

The president's legislation will get more people in the coalfields out of danger and in less time. By targeting more of our money and speeding up the rate at which we can remove hazards, we will be able to remove 142,000 Americans per year from danger nationwide -- or 66,000 more people every year.

Coal has been mined in this country since before there was a United States. Coal helped spark the Industrial Revolution; it moved the railroads that made the Westward Movement possible; it fueled our victory in World War II and powered our nation's rise to a global economic and political power.

When the nation called, America's coal fields and their people answered. But while all benefited from coal, the health and environmental costs fell only on the people living and working in the coalfields.

Under the president's proposed legislation, now being considered by Congress, we can put our money

where the worst problems are and better protect the American people. And we can do it better, sooner and for less money.

Because Pennsylvania has more dangerous sites than other states, Pennsylvania's congressional delegation is playing an active role in solving the problem. Reps. John E. Peterson and Don Sherwood are sponsoring the bill in the House and Sen. Arlen Specter is taking the lead in the Senate.

If Congress doesn't act before Sept. 30, our authority to collect the AML fee will expire. It's time to work faster and smarter on this historic cleanup.

We don't want any new tragedies to remind us of what we have to do. It's time to finish the job.

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